

WHEN THE VIRUS

# The New York Times Magazine

November 8, 2020

CAME

BUFORD HIGHWAY, IN SUBURBAN ATLANTA, HAS LONG BEEN A PLACE WHERE IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS COULD START BUSINESSES AND GET AHEAD. THEN THE PANDEMIC HIT.  
BY MATTHEW SHAER

FOR

THE

AMERICAN

DREAM





O

n April 20, 49 days after Georgia reported its first two coronavirus cases and 39 days after the announcement of the state's first Covid-19-related death, Gov. Brian Kemp convened a news conference on the steps of the Capitol in downtown Atlanta. Speaking to an audience of masked journalists, Kemp opened his remarks by listing the most recent statistics from the Georgia Department of Public Health: 18,947 positive tests since the beginning of the pandemic and 733 deaths. "We understand that these are more than just numbers," he said. "These are Georgians that we're talking about."

Still, Kemp went on, he could no longer in good conscience allow the state to remain under lockdown. "Crops are rotting," he said. "Small-business owners are seeing sales plummet." He announced that effective that

same week, Georgia, close to last in the United States to issue a stay-at-home order, would be among the earliest states to begin lifting it. The reopening would happen in stages: Tattoo parlors and nail salons and bowling alleys could receive customers that week, while restaurants and movie theaters would have to wait until the following Monday. "By taking this measured action," Kemp said, "we will get Georgians back to work safely without undermining the progress that we have all made in the battle against Covid-19."

Among the Georgians to watch a clip of the conference was Sagar Alam. "I couldn't believe what I was hearing," Alam recalled recently. "Like, it absolutely did not make sense to me, not in the slightest." A 42-year-old native of Dhaka, Bangladesh, Alam immigrated to the Atlanta area in 1994, at 16, intent on following his father, who arrived in the United States five years earlier, into the local restaurant business. In Georgia, Alam waited on tables, washed dishes, did some catering. By the early 2000s, he had saved

enough money to buy a pizzeria, which he later sold at a profit. In 2017, he and a few Bangladeshi-American friends opened Monsoon Masala, a restaurant specializing in South Asian cuisine. Alam was appointed head chef and manager; it was usually his face, bearded and smiling, that guests saw when entering the dining room.

Monsoon Masala occupies the far corner of a strip mall on Buford Highway, a busy corridor in DeKalb County — the northeastern quadrant of Atlanta's metropolitan area — that connects the middle-class communities Doraville, Chamblee and Brookhaven with the wealthier suburbs to the northeast. An especially diverse neighborhood on the periphery of a proudly diverse city, Buford Highway has long been a popular dining destination. "If there is one question most frequently asked by and of food-obsessed Atlantans," Atlanta magazine noted last year, "it is this: 'What should I eat on Buford Highway?'" On prepandemic Friday nights, all 35 tables in Monsoon Masala were usually full.

"We got to the point where we cleared \$10,000 in a good month," Alam told me. "Then in January, I went to go see a friend, right? He owns a Chinese restaurant on Buford Highway. I saw this guy behind the register. I said, 'Didn't that guy just come back from China?'" Alam had read in the news about the coronavirus outbreak in the city of Wuhan. "My friend, he said, 'Oh, yes, he got back yesterday.' And he was working! That's when I got scared about how serious this could be."

**Sagar Alam cooking a chicken curry in his restaurant, Monsoon Masala, in the Chamblee area off Buford Highway. Opening pages: Monsoon Masala nestled in Buford Highway's Crossroads Village shopping mall.**

It was early May, and Alam was reclining in a booth in the back of Monsoon Masala's empty dining room. He spoke haltingly, his voice muffled by his white N95 mask. "Business got slow toward the end of February," he remembered, "and worse in March." In early April — shortly

after Kemp signed an executive order shutting bars and nightclubs and limiting gatherings of more than 10 people at any sort of business establishment — it shriveled completely. Schools were closed, the streets were empty and people were trying not to spend money. No one was ordering takeout. Alam stopped paying himself a salary and dismissed the entire waitstaff, but he promised to keep paying his four full-time employees as long as he and the other owners were able. “I couldn’t bring myself to send them away with empty hands,” he said.

Alam could afford his generosity, at least to a point. He had enough savings to cover his mortgage and groceries for his wife and two small children. And his commercial landlord, an African immigrant who owned the entire strip mall, had agreed to lower April’s rent by half. Thanks to an influx of cash from Sayem Motin, a Monsoon Masala owner who had stakes in several local gas stations — essential businesses that were allowed to operate at full capacity during the lockdown — the restaurant managed to avoid going under. But it was no longer profitable. The owners were a few days late with April’s rent and more than two weeks late with May’s. “Our lease, remember, was six years,” Alam said. Behind his glasses, his eyes shimmered with frustration. “You try to get out of that lease, and guess what? You get sued for the balance. So however many months left — 30, 32 — it’s that times \$6,600.”

Shortly after Kemp’s news conference on the Capitol steps, Alam and his partners gathered to deliberate the fate of Monsoon Masala. In many ways, the prospect of reopening the dining room worried the owners more than the prospect of a continued lockdown. Under lockdown, their landlord had been willing to extend the owners a break on their rent, and their various utility accounts had been put on hold. But after Kemp’s announcement, no more leeway would be extended; all those deferred bills would be coming due. This was to say nothing of the health risks: Already, one cook was refusing to show up to work. For both moral and business reasons, Alam was loath to put his employees in the path of a virus that was still stampeding across the state. “One of my people gets sick, or I get sick, it’s going to be a problem,” he told me. “A customer gets sick, it’s a *big* problem. It would be ruinous for us.”

The owners of Monsoon Masala decided to keep the dining room shuttered but continue to accept delivery and pickup orders. Considering how many other restaurants on Buford Highway were throwing open their doors to in-person diners, it was a gamble, but Alam couldn’t come up with a better solution. He felt trapped. “We have to live, you know?” he said. “We have to stay alive. And I am an optimist. I like to think everything will someday get better. Maybe there will be a vaccine. I think there is going to be a vaccine.”

He paused, rubbing his cupped hands together as if there were kindling between them. “I *know* there is going to be a vaccine. I pray for it.”

**W**hen the coronavirus arrived in the United States in January, it was briefly possible to believe that Covid-19, for which no cure or treatment was available, would be a great leveler of societal and economic difference. After all, New York, the financial capital of the country, was also the city hardest hit in the pandemic’s first months. The rich contracted Covid as easily as the poor; big department stores saw their business erode alongside that of neighborhood cafes.

But as the number of infections increased, it became obvious that the virus, far from ignoring inequality, was actually worsening it. “Emerging morbidity and mortality data,”

a report in the medical journal *The Lancet* argued in April, “have already clearly demonstrated what many have feared: a pandemic in which the brunt of the effects falls on already vulnerable U.S. populations, and in which the deeply rooted social, racial and economic health disparities in the country have been laid bare.” White-collar employees could telecommute. Millions of others — nurses, grocery-store employees, postal workers and janitors — had no such

option. “These front-line workers, disproportionately Black and brown, then are typically a part of residentially segregated communities,” Sharrelle Barber, of Drexel University’s Dornsife School of Public Health, told *The Lancet*. “They don’t have that privilege of quote unquote ‘staying at home.’”

People of color and recent immigrants, the data showed, were getting sick at higher rates than other Americans, dying at higher rates and suffering more economically. Nor did funding allocated by Congress help balance the scales: As of mid-April, the accommodations and food industries, in which many recent immigrants are employed, had received just 9 percent of the \$349 billion initially provided to businesses to pay their workers, despite being decimated by the effects of the pandemic. (In Georgia, these same sectors have shed more than 60,000 jobs to date.) A recent study by NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health estimates that about one in three white households in the United States are dealing with severe financial problems related to the pandemic. By comparison, 60 percent of Black households and 72 percent of Latino households are similarly struggling.

In late April, as Georgia lurched through the phases of reopening — and as coronavirus cases continued to increase — I started driving from my home on the other side of DeKalb County to Buford Highway to speak to residents like Sagar Alam. The area, with its majority-minority population and upwardly mobile residents, seemed to offer an important testing ground for Kemp’s stated theory of recovery: that the risks of the pandemic, however dire, were outweighed by the importance, to Georgia and Georgians, of getting back to work.

**‘I think of Buford Highway as this complicated tapestry, where you’ve got people coming from all over the world to live out their dreams.’**

The portion of Buford Highway connecting Doraville to Brookhaven — what Atlantans are usually talking about when they talk about Buford Highway — measures just under six miles; at its widest, it accommodates seven lanes of car traffic. It is hilly but not beautiful, and distinctly American in its strip-malled sprawl. Freeways weave through it like laces on an old boot. Nail salons abut massage parlors and Chinese restaurants and more nail salons. The lot for the Pink Pony gentlemen’s club gives way to a Microtel and then a pizza parlor called the Big Bang. There are few trees. Almost no one walks anywhere, partly because there are few sidewalks and partly because of the unshaded heat, which starts in mid-spring and doesn’t let up until November.

Since the 1980s, thousands of recent immigrants have moved to the Buford Highway area, drawn by the relatively affordable rents, the customer base afforded by plentiful car traffic and the sense of community. To many Atlantans, the area isn’t so much a thoroughfare or a neighborhood but an idea — the purest distillation of the “International City” that Mayor Andrew Young bragged about in the run-up to the 1996 Summer Olympic Games. In 2002, a scholar named Susan Walcott randomly distributed a survey to local entrepreneurs; among the 26 respondents who identified their ethnicity, she later reported, 13 different regions were represented, from the Caribbean to Central America to Southeast Asia. Today, by one estimate, more than 1,000 of the businesses on the highway are owned by immigrants.

“I think of Buford Highway as this complicated tapestry, where you’ve got people coming from all over the world to live out their dreams,” Rebekah Cohen Morris, a council member in the city of Doraville, told me recently. “Public transportation is good, so you don’t need a car. The apartments are relatively cheap. But it’s also a place where, long before

the pandemic, a lot of people were in precarious situations,” she went on. “They were working low-wage jobs, they were barely making rent. They were already teetering.”

Cohen Morris is tall and slender, with a pierced nose and a pair of tattoos twisting up the inside of each forearm, one reading “redemption” and the other “reconciliation” in Greek. Born in Manhattan, Cohen Morris was raised in Georgia, where her evangelical parents moved to open a leather-repair business. In 2014, she and her husband bought their first house, in Doraville, and Cohen Morris took a job teaching English at nearby Cross Keys High School. Later, she founded a nonprofit organization called Los Vecinos, or the Neighbors, which advocated on behalf of the residents of the low-income apartment complexes that line Buford Highway. Her work won her support from Doraville’s Latino population, and last fall, she put her name on the ballot for Doraville’s City Council. She was sworn in on Jan. 4, two days before the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a travel warning for Americans planning on visiting Wuhan.

“I remember in March, right when all the schools were closing, I said to my husband, ‘Well, this is something that’s going to affect us all, all over the world,’” Cohen Morris told me. She scoffed at her own naïveté: “We’ll all be in it together! We’ll support each other.” But new infections in Doraville, Chamblee and Brookhaven quickly exceeded those in more affluent parts of DeKalb County. In April, unemployment in DeKalb was at 13.3 percent, higher than the statewide rate of 12.6 percent, itself the highest for Georgia in decades. Cohen Morris was deluged with text messages from friends who had lost cleaning or service-industry jobs.

Doraville is approximately 55 percent Hispanic, and the areas bordering the highway are populated largely by recent immigrants — many of them undocumented, according to Cohen Morris. Although the coronavirus forced a reduction in the pace of raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, many residents of Doraville discovered that a new threat had emerged. “If you’re undocumented,” Cohen Morris said, “you can’t get food stamps, you can’t get assistance from HUD” — the Department of Housing and Urban Development — “and you can’t get stimulus money.”

In the reopening of the state, some of Cohen Morris’s constituents saw hope: If business did pick back up, restaurants and hotels and construction sites would need cheap labor again. But others were terrified. “My friends were saying, ‘Well, I’m stuck, because I need to work, I don’t have enough savings to stay home, but I don’t want to get sick,’” Cohen Morris recalled. By April 20, DeKalb County alone had reported more than 1,500 total cases of coronavirus. By April 30, the total had risen to more than 2,000.

To Cohen Morris, the fact that Kemp was reversing the lockdown was cause enough for alarm. States like Minnesota were keeping residents at home through June; in Massachusetts, Gov. Charlie Baker, a Republican,

**Below: Cakes and pastries that Maria and her daughter G. were selling at a restaurant off Buford Highway.**

would not allow the state to enter the final phase of reopening until July. Some of Georgia’s neighbors in the Southeast were putting into place what Cohen Morris felt were more common-sense measures: Tennessee, for example, reopened in late April but permitted individual counties to help shape their own plans and protocols. Even President Trump seemed skeptical, suggesting after Kemp’s announcement that Georgia could “wait a little bit longer. Just a little bit, not much. Because safety has to predominate.”

Kemp’s approach left no room for municipal governments to be flexible: Local regulations, he ordered, could not be “more or less restrictive” than the state mandate. “Our orders sought to bring clarity to Covid-19 restrictions statewide,” Cody Hall, a spokesman for Kemp, told me recently, arguing that the diverging local rules throughout the state were often confusing. But Cohen Morris said: “It was a big blanket directive, and it left us no agency to do what was right for us.” She added: “The governor wanted businesses to reopen, but he didn’t really care what happened to the people who had to work there. He wanted to wash the state’s hands of having to support them.”

**I**n May, in the parking lot of a taqueria off Buford Highway, I met a woman named Maria, whom Cohen Morris knew through her previous work with Los Vecinos. Dark-haired and short, with rounded features and wide-set almond eyes, Maria — who asked to be identified only by her first name on account of her family’s immigration status — was in her mid-60s. She and her youngest daughter came to the United States from Monterrey, Mexico, in 2003 to join Maria’s then-husband, a janitor at a local hotel. Maria and her daughter, whom she asked be identified only by her first initial, G., stayed. Maria’s ex-husband did not. “We were fighting about money; we fought about everything,” she told me. After he left, she took a series of odd jobs: house cleaner, cook at McDonald’s, cashier at a popular hair salon on Buford Highway.

In 2018, G., who has Down syndrome and a heart condition, graduated from high school. “While G. was still in school, she had friends, she had her teachers,” Maria said. “She could take unpaid internships at places like Kroger and Pizza Hut. It made her feel valuable. It made her feel like she was needed. But she does not have papers, and after graduation, all of that went away. I thought: What’s a job that we can do together, so I can be there for my daughter?”

She settled on baking and set out to relearn some of her late mother’s favorite recipes: chocolate flan, small cakes, *pay de queso* (a Mexican cheesecake). Her daughter enjoyed being her assistant, and the two other immigrants who shared their two-bedroom apartment on Buford Highway were happy to serve as taste testers. “They liked the free samples,” Maria joked. “My flan is very strong.” Three or four times a week, in the evenings, Maria and her daughter would walk to the taquerias that lined the highway and sell pastries and bouquets of fresh flowers Maria arranged herself to the customers waiting in line for takeout.

“We made very little,” Maria told me. “About \$80 a day.” It was just enough to cover her phone bill, medications and groceries, plus the monthly rent on their bedroom — though she’d had to accept \$200 in rent relief from Los Vecinos. “I don’t like to take handouts,” Maria said. “I want to be able to work for my money. But sometimes you trust in God.”

In the first weeks of the lockdown, Maria and G. spent no more than an hour a week outside their apartment. Their sole forays into the world were supermarket runs, for which they donned every piece of protective gear available to them: surgical gloves, sunglasses, homemade paper masks. Maria’s age and high blood pressure put her at risk, and her daughter had her heart condition. “Imagine one of us gets sick,” Maria told me in late April. “We’re both going to get sick. Because we’re together at every moment. We live in the same small room.” Maria believed she could handle it if G. contracted Covid; she was sure she could nurse her daughter back to health. The idea of getting sick herself, though — it terrified her. What would happen to her daughter then?





By mid-May, Maria had expended her meager savings, along with the rent money from Los Vecinos. She'd heard that with the end of the lockdown, landlords were resuming evictions on Buford Highway, and she feared she might be next. "Sometimes, when I'm feeling hopeless and desperate, I think about going back to Mexico," she told me. "But G. stops me, because her life is here. She's been here since she was in kindergarten. I no longer have my mother or father in Mexico. They're both dead. What is there to go back to?" She didn't want to bother her older daughters, who lived in the United States but not in Georgia — they had their own families to worry about, and the daughter in Texas, she was struggling to pay her rent, too. Maria sighed. "So, I just pray every day to God that he will continue to take care of us," she said.

Later that month, I ordered a few cakes from Maria and arranged to pick them up at the same taqueria parking lot where I'd met her before. She had just finished up a round of deliveries; I found her waiting in a friend's car. She revealed a dozen clamshells, each containing a cake. A truck passed and squealed to a halt. A tousled head emerged from an open window.

"How much?" the man said.

"\$10," Maria said.

Through the fabric of her mask, her voice was muffled. She held up a flan in the direction of the truck, moving it back and forth, as if it were a game-show prize. Expressionless, the man slowly retracted his head, rolled up the window and drove away.

Maria previously told me she was done selling cakes on the highway. "Mostly we are taking custom orders, by phone," she had said. "And I won't go out like I used to. Just here and there." Plus, she had emphasized, G. would always remain at the apartment.

**Above: The Doraville City Council member Rebekah Cohen Morris, left, meeting with a family in her district.**

When I asked her what had changed her mind, she shrugged. The state was open again, her landlord was asking for rent and she had to work. "*Sin opción*," she said, finally. No choice.

**M**

aria qualified for assistance under the CARES Act passed by Congress and signed by President Trump in March, which issued one-time checks of up to \$1,200 to individuals whose households made less than \$100,000 a year. But Maria didn't have a computer or a command of English.

Rolfy Bueso had both. A native of Honduras, Bueso, who is block-jawed and heavily tattooed, with dark hair swept up into a pompadour, owns two barbershops on Buford Highway. On the neighborhood's spectrum of financial security, he sat on the end opposite Maria: His business had been profitable for years — enough so that until the pandemic hit, he'd been scouting spaces for a third location. He was an American citizen, naturalized in 2018; he owned his house plus a second rental unit; he was fluent in English and thus able to rapidly obtain a loan from the Paycheck Protection Program, the \$669 billion fund the CARES Act established to help businesses and organizations continue to pay their workers during the pandemic.

In mid-May, I watched him cut the hair of a regular client, who had driven two and a half hours from Birmingham. "I'd drive 15 hours to see you, Rolfy," the man, whose name was Isaac Aguirre, said, chuckling. "That's how good my man is, my man right here." His hair was violently



**Rolfy Bueso**  
cutting the hair of  
**Francisco Barrera**  
at one of Bueso's  
two barbershops  
in Chamblee.

pink. As Bueso went at it with a pair of clippers, a pastel snowfall spread across his shoulders.

"You get the P.P.P. money?" Bueso asked. Aguirre owned a nightclub in Birmingham; Alabama was still barring restaurants and entertainment venues from reopening, so he and his family were living on savings.

"I got the thousand bucks," Aguirre answered.

"No, that's the stimulus."

"Oh," Aguirre said, sounding doubtful. "Oh, yeah. Did you?"

"Yeah. \$2,000," Bueso said. "Which was OK, but I'd asked for \$10,000."

Aguirre nodded. "Don't move your head," Bueso scolded him.

Bueso's shop had two rooms. The front was for the contract employees, who rented chairs from Bueso and tended to a mixture of walk-ins and scheduled appointments. Bueso himself worked in the "V.I.P. area" in back, accessible via a numerical security lock, guarded by several cameras and dominated by a fridge full of beer and soda and a 60-inch flat-screen. He could handle 15 clients a day. "Right now, it's about 10," he said. "So I'm getting closer to the traffic I had before the corona thing. The guys in the front, though — foot traffic is down. They're hurting."

Bueso was wearing a transparent face shield, which he raised and lowered in demonstration. "Nothing going to get to me through this thing," he said, smiling through the plastic. "Plus, I'm extra careful, you know?" He disinfected both rooms of the shop every morning and every evening; as soon as he got home, he threw his clothes in the washer and took a shower before hugging his 3-year-old niece, Camila. But he was a businessman, too, he stressed, and a realist. A month and a half away from the barbershop — it hadn't been fatal to the bottom line. Another month away, and he'd have been in a hole he couldn't dig out of.

Bueso tried to avoid talking politics with his clients, but the pandemic had made that close to impossible. In the time I spent with him at his shop, nearly every man who dropped into Bueso's chair seemed to want to discuss either Kemp or the president. Bueso would grunt along politely, recalling segments he'd caught on cable news. He respectfully referred to Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, as "Dr. Fauci," but he was also sympathetic to Kemp: "The media talks bad about him. But he's been doing good, too."

There was a blur of motion on the iPad Bueso used to monitor the cameras in the hallway. He opened the door. "This is Fabian," he said, introducing me to a short man dressed in scuffed jeans and a button-down. Fabian was from Venezuela and used to own an electronics store in Plaza Fiesta, the large indoor shopping mall on Buford Highway where Bueso had his original shop. "His store is now closed," Bueso explained.

"But I'm still selling," Fabian said. "Out of my truck."

"What happened to the store?" I asked.

"Couldn't pay the rent," Fabian said. He was studying his shoes.

Bueso clicked his tongue. "But it'll get better, amigo," he said. "It will."

Judging purely by the statistics on the Covid-19 dashboard maintained by the state, there was, at that point, cause for optimism. In early May, the Georgia Department of Public Health published data indicating that new cases were falling significantly in several hard-hit counties, apparently bearing out Kemp's assertion that the situation in the state was improving. But others, including state lawmakers and reporters from The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, called those figures into question, pointing to obvious errors in chronologies and data curation, and discrepancies with other research that showed the infection rates had remained mostly steady throughout the month. "I have a hard time understanding how this happens without it being deliberate," State Representative Jasmine Clark, who has a Ph.D. in microbiology and molecular

genetics, told The Journal-Constitution. Harry Heiman, a clinical associate professor at Georgia State's School of Public Health, went further, labeling the errors "criminal." An investigative report in Atlanta magazine by Keren Landman, a doctor and epidemiologist, recently showed that through May, state officials and epidemiologists had been locked in a prolonged dispute, concluding in the "sidelining" of the health-department officials who should have been in charge of presenting the data to the public.

On May 11, Kemp's office apologized and promised the dashboard was now "fixed."

O

n July 6, Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms of Atlanta revealed she and her husband and one of their children tested positive for the coronavirus. Using her authority as mayor, she instituted a mask mandate that required all people over age 10 in the city to cover their faces in public places. The Doraville council members convened on Zoom and debated what to do in their own jurisdiction. (They had abandoned the idea of meeting in person after a council member in neighboring Chamblee tested positive for the coronavirus.) At least one council member was wary of wading into a political battle. Still, "the numbers from DeKalb were terrifying," Cohen Morris said. "Our constituents wanted a mask mandate. We wanted to protect our constituents." A face-covering ordinance passed in a unanimous vote.

The mandate put Doraville, like Atlanta, in direct conflict with Kemp, who in mid-July issued a new executive order forbidding any city or county to institute new mask policies and suspending all active mandates. On July 16, after Bottoms said her mandate would continue, Kemp filed suit against the mayor in state court, arguing that she did not have authority to override his order. The Doraville council reconvened on Zoom and agreed to wait and see what happened with the case. After a judge ordered Kemp and Bottoms into mediation, Kemp told his lawyers to back down, publicly blaming Bottoms's "refusal" to "further negotiate a compromise." The lawsuit was withdrawn. Atlanta's mask mandate could stay.

A few days later, I had lunch with Cohen Morris at Monterrey Mexican, a taqueria on the Doraville side of Buford Highway. I hadn't eaten at a restaurant in three months, and entering Monterrey was a disorienting experience. There was a sign on the door prohibiting guests with any sort of fever; inside, the servers carried plates of tacos and bottomless margaritas in gloved hands, their faces hidden by masks from the patrons, each seated a full table away from the nearest other customer. The manager approached shyly and spent a few moments speaking to Cohen Morris in Spanish. "He wanted to know about the protocol for the patio — what they needed to do about social distancing when it's outside," Cohen Morris told me after he left. "There's still not a lot of information out there; people feel very much like they're in the dark. Or they're stuck in these truly impossible situations, having to make truly impossible choices."

Sagar Alam had insisted that the dining room of Monsoon Masala would not open until he was sure he could guarantee the safety of his customers and staff — an uncommon decision among the restaurants along Buford Highway, and one that, by the summer, seemed increasingly untenable. By nature, Alam was an optimistic person, as many restaurateurs are. That the summer could be worse than the spring had not occurred to him. He focused on what meager positives he could find. Through June, delivery orders were up. When a family friend named Chang, who was studying marketing at a nearby community college, volunteered to help manage the counter, Alam gratefully accepted; with Chang out front, he could dedicate more time to the kitchen. He experimented with a few new dishes, including grilled steak and salmon. He baked lots of fresh pastries.

But Monsoon Masala was still in the red. And despite Alam's increasingly emotional entreaties, his landlord continued to refuse the same kind of break

he offered during the first month of the pandemic. "He said, 'Well, the state is back in business, the banks are back in business,'" Alam recalled. The landlord had to pay his mortgage to the bank, and Alam had to pay him. Alam and his partners emptied their savings accounts, then maxed out their credit cards. They discussed shuttering the business altogether.

Instead, in July, they reopened the dining room. It hurt Alam to reverse the position he held in April — that he would wait for a vaccine, that he wouldn't put anyone else at risk, including his wife and children. But he could see no other way forward. He took out a small advertisement in a local paper, offering discounts for in-person meals. At the restaurant, he never removed his gloves and conical face mask, which left deep furrows on the bridge of his nose and an itchy rash on his cheeks. He fretted about kissing his children good night.

**'Sometimes, when I'm feeling hopeless and desperate, I think about going back to Mexico.'**

In June, Alam's father-in-law in Dhaka came down with Covid. A few days later, he was dead. Alam and his wife, Irine, mourned at home, in private; they mourned in phone calls and video conference sessions with relatives; they mourned with other members of the extended family who had also immigrated to Georgia.

One of those family members was Irine's uncle, her father's only brother. The two men were born two years apart, and their bond, Alam told me, was "extremely strong. They were almost the same person." When the uncle came down with Covid, too, in July, and died in his sleep at his apartment in Chamblee, it made a kind of cosmic sense. Still, Alam was furious. He felt he was living through an entirely preventable disaster. If he'd had a sense of what would happen once the state started reopening, then why hadn't the government workers? Why hadn't the governor?

When I went to see Alam at Monsoon Masala in late July, the restaurant was empty save for a young couple and their toddler. "Something not spicy," the woman said. Chang rubbed his chin. He was still learning the menu. "Saag paneer," Alam suggested from across the room.

I asked Alam how business was going. By way of an answer, he began writing on a white notepad, then turned it toward me: "\$70,000," it read. "That's how much my partners and I have personally lost since March," he said.

"How much longer can you go on?" I asked.

"I don't know. Until the end."

"But how will you know when the end is?"

"That's right," he said. "That's exactly right."

W

hen I saw Maria in May, she had vowed that she and G. would sell their cakes and flowers only outdoors, and only one or two nights a week rather than three or four. One of her older daughters laughed at this — wasn't the virus a hoax, she said, or blown out of proportion by the media? But Maria trusted the Centers for Disease Control, whose hulking Chamblee campus she often drove past on the way home from work. And she believed the numbers the agency was putting out. In July, the death count statewide surpassed 3,000.

Several of her acquaintances had already contracted the virus, and she listened as they complained of their symptoms: the soreness, (Continued on Page 46)

the fatigue, the raw throats. “To go out more than I am now, it is not worth the risk,” she said in early June. “Because if I get sick, G. will be alone, and I can’t allow that to happen.” She invested in extra masks, and after returning from trips to the grocery store, she soaked her vegetables and fruit in a bleach solution.

Still, just as circumstances eventually forced Sagar Alam’s hand — compelled him to reopen Monsoon Masala when he understood that keeping it closed would have been safer for everyone involved — Maria, too, found herself acting against her instincts. Her needs were immediate, her options practically nonexistent. The “personal responsibility” Kemp was always urging on TV — his entreaties to “stay away from folks in public” — those were luxuries that richer people could afford. Maria had delinquent bills, an empty bank account, a few crumpled \$10 bills on her night stand.

She started going into restaurants again, often taking her daughter along with her. She tried to be selective and relied on her WhatsApp network to tell her which taquerias were relatively uncrowded and thus safer — which places had lots of windows and plenty of airflow.

One evening in July, at a restaurant in Doraville, a customer handed her a \$100 bill. Maria excused herself to get change. Replaying the sequence of events in her head later, she would be certain that’s how it happened: The girl at the register, mutual friends would later tell her, had Covid-19. She coughed through her mask, took the \$100 and handed back a stack of bills.

Later that month, Maria began to suffer from sharp stomach pains and frequent diarrhea. At first she was inclined to ignore it — she had a sensitive digestive system. She tried eating bananas and drinking Pedialyte, but she had developed a strange sour taste in her mouth. Soon, she lost her sense of smell.

In the mornings, she would wake up exhausted and shivering. Had she and G. had a larger apartment, or even an apartment of their own, she might have tried to quarantine herself, but the two women had just one room and their shared double bed. Maria opened the window, to produce a little bit of air flow, and gave her daughter the bed. She slept on the floor.

By July 30, G. had developed a fever, which Maria treated with large doses of Tylenol. G. recovered quickly. Maria did not.

She considered seeing a doctor to be a last resort. She had heard scary things about hospitals, about how people with coronavirus entered them and never came out. And what if someone started asking questions about who else she’d had contact with? Questions like that might lead to more questions — about her daughter and her immigration status.

On Aug. 6, two weeks after she began feeling ill, Maria collapsed in the hallway outside her bathroom. Dazed, pale and coated in a cold sweat, she called for G., but her daughter couldn’t hear her. The next day, she drove to a clinic that was known to be welcoming to Spanish-speaking clients. She and G. waited in the car for four hours, in the sun, for an appointment. She felt sicker than she had ever been and was sure she was going to die.

In the clinic, a doctor tried to put her on an IV drip for dehydration. He wanted to call an ambulance to take her to the hospital, but Maria resisted; G. wouldn’t be allowed to ride with her. So she drove herself home.

Maria’s eldest daughter had recently relocated temporarily to Georgia from Indiana, along with her family, to be near her mother. Since Maria and G. had become sick, they had stayed away from her apartment, for fear of infecting her family, but now they had no choice. Maria dropped off G. with her sister and took a taxi to the hospital, where she received a rapid Covid test. It came back positive.

Maria’s room in the Covid ward at Northside Hospital was decorated with prints of flowers. One window overlooked the surrounding medical complexes and the sinuous twist of Route 285, the 10-lane highway that encircles metro Atlanta. Maria learned to recognize the doctors and nurses by the shape of their eyes, the tuck of their eyebrows. Every other identifying feature was hidden from view behind layers of translucent plastic and blue personal protective equipment that crinkled when they walked. All she could think about was G. In her daughter’s entire life, the two women had never passed more than a few hours apart. She was the first thing Maria saw in the morning and the last thing she saw at night before closing her eyes. The thought of being separated from her, it wounded Maria to a degree she was unable to put into words.

G. moved in with her older sister. The days piled up. Maria was still in the hospital, on oxygen, her heart and stomach under constant surveillance. She called her daughter as often as she could. Your voice, she told G., weeping, *tu voz me da fuerza* — it gives me strength.

While Maria was in the hospital, I met G. and her older sister in the parking lot of a strip mall off Buford Highway, where G.’s cousin was having a speech-therapy session. G., barely 4-foot-11, smiled up at me, but she clung to her sister’s waist as if she was worried someone would try to wrest them apart. I asked her sister how G. was doing. “She’s OK,” she answered. “She has her cousins, and they help take care of her.” She added that G. had been drawing a lot: drawings of her and her mother, together.

In mid-August, Maria sent me a text message. “Matthew, prayers help a lot,” she wrote, “because today they conducted tests on my heart, because it was close to failing.” The doctors, she went on, had been spooked by her blood-pressure levels,

which remained dangerously high — her elevated cholesterol was catching up with her. She took some blood thinners and remained on an IV drip.

Every day, she called G. and her eldest daughter. She knew the eldest daughter was struggling, too. Before Covid, she and her husband and their three girls managed to get by on the husband’s income as a day laborer. But they had acquired an additional dependent at the worst possible time. Construction sites in Atlanta were idled, and developers were waiting to break ground on new projects. In mid-August, the husband boarded a bus bound for Indiana, where, he had heard, his old employers were hiring again. Maria’s eldest daughter was left with the four girls.

On Aug. 13, Maria was discharged after seven days at Northside. Her diarrhea had ceased, she was no longer dehydrated and her blood pressure was back within reasonable levels. She returned to her apartment to discover that one of her roommates had also become sick and had been recovering at home; the apartment was damp and musty, the sink piled high with dishes. Maria did what she could, cleaning for an hour or two a day and sleeping 14 hours a night. After two more weeks, G. joined her. “I held her so long,” Maria remembered. “And I just thanked God. Thanked him for answering my prayers.”

The relief was short-lived. In early September, Maria received her first bill from Northside Hospital. Even without the cost of her lab tests, it came to more than \$43,000.

**In the fall**, Georgia’s new daily infections fell below 100 confirmed cases per 100,000 residents for the first time in months, placing the state in the so-called orange zone established by the White House’s Coronavirus Task Force. The nation’s leader in confirmed coronavirus cases as recently as August, the state is now 33rd, well behind new hot spots in the Midwest. “We needed Georgians to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, and I’m very thankful and very proud of the fact that Georgians have stepped up to the plate,” Kemp said at an Oct. 7 press briefing.

On Buford Highway, car traffic picked up again, as did the flights in and out of DeKalb-Peachtree Airport, and every few minutes, a small plane shuddered overhead, its wheels appearing to nearly graze the power lines. Hammering and shouts and tinny music rang out from a construction site adjacent to Rolfy Bueso’s second barbershop.

At Doraville’s City Council meetings, the primary concerns were no longer mask mandates or testing centers but construction permits, noise complaints, code violations. “People want to get back to normal,” Rebekah Cohen Morris told me. “They want this all to be over.”

And yet true normalcy, in the prepandemic sense, felt impossible to imagine, at least until a vaccine arrived. A second spike in new infections could send everyone on Buford Highway into lockdown again, shutting

(Continued on Page 49)



(Continued from Page 46)

down the construction, slowing the traffic and reversing the small gains business owners enjoyed in September and October. Already there were troubling signs: In one week in late October, health officials reported a 20 percent rise in new infections across the state, along with a corresponding rise in hospitalizations.

Even if the numbers sink back down through the remainder of the fall and winter, for many residents, the damage has been done. To tenants who owe thousands in back rent to their landlords, to the former employees of shuttered hotels and restaurants, to the children of low-income families, who often do not have the Wi-Fi or laptops needed to attend remote-learning sessions and are frequently conscripted into babysitting siblings while their parents work. "I think we made a trade-off, and now we're living with the consequences," Cohen Morris told me. "We didn't want to close our bars or our movie theaters. It was like, 'Hey, maybe if we reopen and pretend everything is going to be OK, maybe that will make it OK.' Instead of doing what we needed to do, which was to hunker down. And now you've got an already vulnerable population that has been made even more vulnerable."

Researchers are only beginning to understand the effects of the pandemic and the official handling of it on small businesses, but here, too, the early findings are grim. Robert Fairlie, an economics professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, recently published a study trying to gauge the pandemic's effect on small businesses in *The Journal of Economics and Management Strategy*. Working from U.S. Census data, he found that the number of active business owners in the country fell by 22 percent between February and

April — and immigrant business owners fared much worse, decreasing by 36 percent. Though many returned to work by June, the numbers still remained 18 percent below what they had been. Among the demographics Fairlie surveyed, only Black business owners fared slightly worse. The collapse of negotiations between the White House and Congress over a second round of stimulus funding, meanwhile, has not only precluded the possibility of further P.P.P. loans but also produced problems for business owners who received the first round. There is little clarity over how the loans are to be taxed and how businesses that are still struggling can apply to have them forgiven.

When I went to Monsoon Masala for the last time, in October, the dining room was cold and dark. Alam emerged from the kitchen wearing a mask embroidered with a bear's nose and whiskers — a gift from his daughter. "I'd give it to you," he said, when I admired it, "but it has my germs."

We sat down at one of the tables. Alam slid a saltshaker back and forth between his hands. How was his wife? "Good," Alam said. "OK." Then he corrected himself. "Bad. We have the same conversation almost every day. What to do? What to do, what to do."

Just 10 months earlier, Alam was dreaming of opening a second location of Monsoon Masala. Now it was all he could do to keep the original restaurant afloat. He recalled that a few weeks earlier, he and his business partners came up with a last-ditch scheme: Half the space would remain a restaurant. The other half would be converted into a combination hookah lounge and bar. They'd written up a plan and submitted it to their landlord. The landlord refused on account of a county ordinance — the space wasn't big enough. The far corner of the restaurant was still roped off.

"Work in progress for better tomorrow," a sign read. "Visit again." ♦

## KENKEN

Fill the grid with digits so as not to repeat a digit in any row or column, and so that the digits within each heavily outlined box will produce the target number shown, by using addition, subtraction, multiplication or division, as indicated in the box. A 5x5 grid will use the digits 1-5. A 7x7 grid will use 1-7.

5	3-		1-	1-
2÷	2-	3+		
			5×	
2-	2÷	2-	2	
			1-	

14×	4	1-	2÷		1-	4-
	14+		3	8+		
6×		2÷			6+	
		8+	1-	1-		2-
6×				4	4-	
20×	6-	1-	24×			12×
			2-			

## Answers to puzzles of 11.1.20

### WEST-SOUTHWEST

O	N	S	T	A	R	I	C	U	E	B	E	R	T	C	H	U	G
R	E	P	O	S	E	R	A	G	X	A	X	E	S	R	O	M	E
S	W	A	Y	U	P	H	I	G	Q	U	A	N	T	A	S	I	N
E	M	T	S	O	D	E	S	U	M	M	E	R	S	W	E	A	R
R	E	S	T	A	P	L	E	P	O	I	S	W	A	N	L	A	K
				O	R	A	L	S	O	R	S	O	S	P	A		
S	W	A	R	M	R	E	C	E	P	T	I	O	N	S	P	I	T
A	O	N	E	T	R	E	N	D	T	H	O	R	S	N	A	R	K
M	E	N	S	C	H	A	D	O	V	E	R	O	C	T	E	R	I
				S	E	A	D	O	V	E	A	I	W	A	O	B	O
F	O	R	W	A	N	T	O	F	A	B	E	T	T	E	R	S	W
O	P	E	R	O	E	U	F	O	T	H	E	L	L	O			
A	R	T	Y	N	A	S	O	B	I	E	S	U	P	E	R	B	
M	A	R	E	S	M	E	A	N	C	E	L	I	A	O	L	A	Y
S	H	O	R	T	U	S	P	A	R	K	L	I	N	G	S	W	I
				A	N	Y	A	C	U	E	L	A	T	E			
I	S	C	A	R	I	O	T	C	D	T	S	A	N	D	R	E	E
S	W	E	P	T	F	O	R	J	O	Y	S	T	Y	D	A	N	O
L	I	L	I	O	H	Y	O	U	S	W	I	S	H	L	I	S	T
A	P	T	S	R	O	S	I	N	H	A	L	S	E	V	E	R	S
M	E	S	H	M	O	T	E	T	A	T	L	T	I	E	D	Y	E

### KENKEN

3	5	2	1	4
1	4	5	3	2
2	3	4	5	1
4	1	3	2	5
5	2	1	4	3

5	2	1	6	7	4	3
2	3	6	4	5	1	7
7	1	4	5	3	2	6
1	6	7	2	4	3	5
3	4	2	7	6	5	1
6	5	3	1	2	7	4
4	7	5	3	1	6	2

### CRYPTIC CROSSWORD

P	I	E	R	C	E	S	O	R	C	H	A	R	D
I	R	A	T	U	U	B	B	R					
C	H	E	E	R	I	E	S	T	P	O	S	S	E
K	C	H	E	E	R	I	E	S					
L	A	T	T	E	A	B	A	N	D	O	N	E	D
E	N	E	R	G	A	V	E						
O	A	L	L	I	E	D							
U	N												
D	A	M	A	G	E	S	R	E	S	I	S	T	S
A	B												
N	E	E	D	I	N	E	S	R	H	O	N	E	
G	R	S	R	E	A	P	A						
L	A	I	R	S	P	E	R	T	I	N	E	N	T
E	N	U	A	V	E	N	A	R					
S	I	G	N	E	T	S							

ACROSS: 1. anag. recipe 5. or + chard 9. che(Erie)st 10. possess - ss 11. lat(T)e 12. a + band + one + d 13. d. + allied 15. anag. Teheran 17. dam + ages 19. anag. sisters 21. anag. in dens see 23. R + hone 25. l + airs 26. per + tinent (rev. rep; anag. intent) 27. homophone cygnets 28. ens(n)are (anag. Serena)

DOWN: 1. pick + led 2. ere + ct. 3. car + eening (anag. engine) 4. ste + ward (anag. set) 5. out(R)age 6. cup + ID 7. hidden tabs in these 8. Dr. + esden (anag. needs) 14. slumbering - s 16. rest + rains 17. D + angles 18. s(her)pas 19. re + serve 20. she + at + he 22. initials impose some sanctions upon English 24. rev. a + repo

### ON-SET EXTRAS

- Beverages: Cola, juice, water
- Dances: Conga, minuet, tango
- Fabrics: Rayon, satin, tweed
- Fish: Carp, tuna, trout
- Fruit: Banana, lime, plum
- Greek letters: Beta, gamma, sigma
- Musical instruments: Flute, piano, tuba
- Numbers: Eight, nine, forty
- Precipitation: Hail, rain, snow
- Relatives: Aunt, cousin, sister

### YIN-YANG

●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

### Answers to puzzle on Page 48

clude them in your score. gthmate dictionary words in the beehive, feel free to ay, labia, labial, lantal, lullaby. If you found other nnd, banana, bialy, biamnual, billy, blint, bubbly, bully, annually (3 points). Also: Alibi, oily, annual, annually, BEE